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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 002584

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NSC FOR PASCUAL

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [UNESCO](#) [SCUL](#) [EG](#)  
SUBJECT: UNESCO DIRECTOR GENERAL - NEXT STEPS

REF: A. SECSTATE 130916  
    1B. CAIRO 2411  
    1C. PARISFR 1185  
    1D. PARISFR 1945  
    1E. PARISFR 2220  
    1F. PARISFR 2262  
    1G. PARISFR 2227  
    1H. OLIVER-SCOBEEY TELCON 12-19-2008

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey  
Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) Summary. Egyptian Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni's candidacy to be Director General of UNESCO will likely create a serious irritant in our bilateral relationship with the Egyptians, as well as a public diplomacy challenge here and in other Arab states. We have made clear our position and our concerns about Hosni's record to the Egyptian Foreign Minister. Rumors are circulating in Cairo that we will "withdraw" from UNESCO if Hosni is appointed, and that we object to Hosni because he is Arab and Muslim, a storyline that will likely galvanize support for Hosni throughout the region. We have been approached by a number of close contacts from Egypt's liberal elite on behalf of Hosni, including by one of his advisers.

2. (C) Summary continued. The identification of a serious, alternative candidate who can defeat Hosni on the merits will help to shift the discussion away from our views on Hosni, and defuse a potentially damaging situation that could last through the end of the UNESCO electoral process in October 2009. Possible options may be to back an Arab-American, or a European who is Muslim, if such a qualified candidate exists.  
End summary.

3. (C) The Egyptians have staked out their ground on Hosni (reftel a) and we do not believe they will back away from supporting his candidacy; he is very close to the first family. Our suggestion that we work together to find a suitable alternate Egyptian candidate was rebuffed by FM Aboul Gheit (reftel b).

4. (C) Hosni's candidacy appears to have solid underpinnings of support beyond Egypt, including from all Arab League states, and possibly some Europeans. (Note: the French Ambassador briefed the Ambassador on the French-Egyptian exchange on this issue during the recent visit of the French Prime Minister. The matter was discussed in both meetings with the Egyptian Prime Minister and President Mubarak. The Egyptians acknowledged that Hosni's "book burning" comment created a problem for the candidacy but argued that it was not in keeping with his true record of supporting tolerance and cultural normalization. They asked, and the French Prime Minister agreed, that the French do nothing for the time being to suggest their support is waning. The Egyptians needed time to repair the damage.)

15. (C) Publicly we are taking the position that we do not comment on how we intend to vote. However, just about all of Cairo's liberal elite knows our position and several have approached the Ambassador to reconsider our position, arguing on behalf of Hosny, citing his virtues and minimizing his faults. Rumors are also circulating that we will "pull out" of UNESCO, or withdraw funding, if Hosni is elected. Hosni said in a recent interview with local media that he believes the U.S. is against his candidacy, "because they do not want an Arab-Muslim to be the next UNESCO Director General."

16. (C) On December 23, Former AmCham President Taher Helmy brought Hossam Nassar, an advisor to Hosni, to meet with the Ambassador. Helmy stressed that he was seeking to facilitate a "very informal and off the record" conversation to better understand the American and Egyptian positions. The Ambassador said that we had only one channel to Egypt on this issue and that remains with the Foreign Ministry. However, given Helmy's long friendship with the U.S. she would be happy to discuss the matter in general terms and off the record. She said that we had made our views known to the government of Egypt. We understood the Minister's strong record of opposing extremism and protecting free artistic expression in Egypt. She stressed that we did not want this issue to become a bilateral problem, nor did we want to in any way have this issue be personalized or seen as an attack on the Minister himself. The United States would cast its vote for the candidate who would be the best qualified on at least two main issues. The candidate should have a strong management record and reputation for transparency; the candidate should be able to forge consensus. The United States did not want to have a director who would be controversial.

CAIRO 00002584 002 OF 002

17. (C) Nassar pressed the case for Hosni, arguing that his anti-Semitic remarks (burning Israeli books) had been taken out of context, and that allegations of Hosni's involvement in corruption were false ("trust me, he's the most honest man I know"). Without addressing specifics, the Ambassador noted that, as a long-serving minister in the Egyptian government, Minister Hosny's public comments on many issues going back years would be closely examined. She indicated that there would be other statements beyond the "book burning" comment to explain. She noted an interview from 1997 in "Ros al Yusuf" that was troubling. She reiterated that the U.S. had made its position known to the government and she did not believe it would change, even with the new administration, given that concerns have already been heard from the Hill.

18. (C) Helmy said that Egyptians had been told by the French that the U.S. was threatening to withdraw from UNESCO or to withdraw funding if Minister Hosny were elected. The Ambassador said that the U.S. had not threatened anyone with anything. The U.S. was focused on finding the most qualified candidate for the job.

19. (C) Nassar and Helmy asked the Ambassador's advice on when and who to approach in the Congress for Hosni to make his case in Washington. The Ambassador said she could not provide that advice and recommended that Ambassador Shoukry in Washington guide them on this issue.

110. (C) Comment. From our perspective, the best solution is for a strong, qualified candidate to emerge as soon as possible who can defeat Hosni on the merits. It is important to displace the current Egyptian media focus on American opposition to Hosni with a positive story of a better qualified candidate that we do support. Should we need to expand our public commentary on the race, we recommend not speaking directly to Hosni's candidacy, but rather note that we are looking for a candidate with strong managerial skills who is a consensus-builder.

111. (C) Comment continued. One attractive scenario would be

for a European of Arab/Muslim background (e.g. a French-Moroccan or a Dutch-Turk), to emerge. This could potentially gain support of the Europeans, provide them with a basis to resist Egyptian pressure to support Hosni, and eliminate the Egyptian contention that we will not support Hosni because he is a Muslim (as FM Aboul Gheit has accused - reftel b). Other possibilities, such as an Arab American candidate, or Colombia's Ingrid Bettancourt (reftel e) are likewise attractive. Whoever the candidate, we strongly urge the Department to move quickly in order to defuse mounting tension between the USG and Egypt, and potentially other friendly Arab states (e.g. Jordan - reftel g).

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